



Brian Leith: Oral History Transcription

Name of interviewee(s):

Brian Leith

Reasons why chosen for an oral history: Producer with an extensive career working both independently and for the BBC in the natural history filmmaking industry.

Name of interviewer:

Robin Hellier

Reasons why interviewer chosen:

Longstanding colleague and friend

Name of cameraman:

Bob Prince

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1. The early years

RH: This is Robin Hellier introducing Brian Leith. An interview on 16th May 2008. Brian, can you just start by telling us what your current job is?

*BL: I'm now working as an executive producer in the Natural History Unit. I've been there for about 2½ years having returned from been an **Indie** and freelancer for many years, working on a couple of things for the Natural History Unit, mainly landmark, HD (High Definition) series.*

RH: Now spinning it right back, can you take us back to the beginning and think of what was your first impression of natural history? What got you really interested in the subject?



BL: Well, I have no idea actually. It's a weird thing. My parents have no interest in it and we lived all my younger life in cities. I think what happened was that when I was about 18 or 19 we moved to Africa and we lived in Nairobi. I made friends when I was doing my A levels there. We used to, mainly through their interest, we'd go to some of the national parks or some of the wildlife spots around Nairobi and then further afield. I then came back to London to go to university and I had just fallen in love with Africa and, of course, Africa means wildlife and the great wide open spaces. So I think that's what got me interested.

At the same time when I joined the Natural History Unit I felt like a complete square peg in a round hole because these were all birdwatchers and avid British naturalists who knew every flower in the hedgerow and I didn't even know what a hedgerow was really. I had no formal training in biology at all really except then at university when I came back to London I did study biology. But I wasn't really ever a naturalist so it kind of crept up on me in a way.

RH: Before you went to Africa or even when you were there, did you see natural history programmes? Can you remember any early natural history programmes that made an impression on you?

BL: Well, I remember seeing David Attenborough in *Zoo Quest* (1) when I was about I suppose 10 or 11, I think it was the Land Divers of Pentecost (2) or something, and being absolutely amazed and thinking that man has got the best life ever. If I could do something I would love to do that. Just sort of wide-eyed with these other places and cultures that he took us to. But it didn't spark any particular interest in the subject for me.

Years later when I lived in Kenya I remember seeing a wonderful film called *Innocent Killers* made by Hugo van Lawick, and I think it was then Jane Goodall when they were together about the wild dogs in the Serengeti (21). I would look back and think we've kind of gone full circle on this because that was very much in Jane Goodall's way. I don't know Hugo van Lawick well enough to know this but I know Jane well enough to know. It was very Jane, it was very emotionally engaged with the animals, treating them like individuals. It was incredibly **anthropomorphic** but I found it a very moving story. It really engaged me with what they were doing and once again I thought wouldn't it be lovely to that job and to be out in the wild of the Serengeti studying wild dogs.

I say full circle just because for the next 20 years, like right through the 70s, 80s, even into the 90s, I think wildlife television was running a million miles away from anthropomorphism. I remember and you remember Jeffery Boswall who'd say you cannot pretend to know what is in the mind of an animal. I believed that for a while and now I'd say, like Jane Goodall, I believe that we can begin to know and I think there's a lot of emotion there, a lot of personality and I think films are coming back to recognise that as well.

So a long answer to a short question.

RH: But it's interesting. You've talked very passionately, engagingly there about television and yet, if I'm right, I think you started your career in radio.

BL: Yes, not that I had a great passion for radio. But when I was finishing my PhD in genetics, which I did in London in the early to mid 70s, I came to the end of writing up my PhD. I had all these friends who were unemployed finishing their PhDs and I could see them eating less and less well and getting thinner and thinner and more and more depressed, and I thought I don't want to go there. I applied for dozens of jobs, post-doctoral jobs or lectureships. I was applying for jobs that I didn't even want to do but just because they were a continuation of studying biology which I did love, and evolution in particular I loved. I didn't even get interviews for any of them.

Then I saw a job advertised in the *New Scientist* in the spring of 1978 for a radio producer in the Natural History Unit and I thought that sounds like an interesting job. At the time I didn't even listen to Radio 4, didn't know it from Adam, I was a real sort of pop music listener. But I did a bit of homework, I applied for the job and to my amazement got an interview, and then to my even greater amazement I got a job. It was just a complete bolt from the blue. It seemed hopelessly glamorous that I should be a radio producer in the BBC

Natural History Unit but it suddenly felt like a very exciting thing to be doing and I really took to it.

I remember at my interview Phil Daley, who was then the Head of BBC Bristol at that time, said to me if you had any preference would you rather work in radio or television? I said something very naïve like I think I'd rather start with one medium before I go onto a second, and I think they gave me a very odd look like he knows nothing. But I got a job as a radio producer in natural history and I loved it. I think actually with hindsight it was great training too.

2. Starting in television

RH: You stayed in radio for quite a while I think, if I recall correctly, so you obviously enjoyed it. How do you think that prepares you for a subsequent career in television?

BL: I was in radio for about four or five years and moving to television, (by that time I was about 30) was an incredibly painful experience. Although I was by that time a reasonably proficient radio producer, moving to television I felt like a very small minnow in a very large pond full of some very impressive sharks. I didn't know anything about images, I'd never really been a photographer. I knew really nothing about television and for several years I thought I don't think I'm going to make this work because I was quite unhappy, and I felt that the radio side had just left me floundering in the middle of a new medium where I didn't understand anything.

But oddly I stuck with it and was given some good opportunities. What I found then and increasingly ever since is that early training in radio, was a training in deadlines. You've got to have it ready by Friday at 7.00. If it's not ready by Friday at 7.00 Radio 4 will have a blank space on Sunday afternoon, so that's a good training. Also a good training in storytelling because every single piece that went into these programmes - *Living World* (3), *Nature* (4), *Wildlife Magazine* (5), a radio magazine programme - every bit of radio you make is a beginning and a middle and an end. So you've done dozens and dozens and dozens of these stories or entire programmes in the space of a few years, and it's a very good training for 'is this a story?', 'why is it a story?', 'how would you go into it?', 'what's the meat of it?', 'what do you get out of it?'

That sort of training and storytelling and writing which is, I think, another key skill, I think has proven very useful to me. I think actually I would say that a lot of TV people could benefit from studying or spending time in radio because it's a very good training for the very simplest of skills that in the end I think are critical to television as well.

RH: That's very interesting. That is very clear about how it helps you and programme makers move from one to another and what you benefit from. From the point of view of your audience, where do you think radio fits in, wildlife radio, and how important is it?

BL: Sadly I don't listen that much to wildlife radio, probably just because of the timing of it. I also feel, and I even felt when I was working in radio, that there's a very strong element of out there with the muddy footsteps in the glen or in the bogs. It's a sort of radio nature trail feel that never really did very much for me because I'm not an English naturalist, I don't know the flowers in the hedgerow or the birds that well. So it never really appealed to me that much. I was much more into the ideas and I think radio is a medium of ideas although it can also do location things very well.

I've sort of lost track of the question there a little but I think it was about where does it fit in. I think it's sadly neglected is the answer. I think not that many people see radio work from the Natural History Unit as being quite on the same radar as the big glamorous television stuff like *Planet Earth* (6) or whatever.

RH: So if we didn't have wildlife radio it might not be missed that much except that it remains quite a good training ground for people who are going to move across into television?

BL: Well, it's an interesting point. I actually love listening to radio and I still listen to Radio 4 all the time. I just love it, especially in the mornings, and I think many people do. All I'm saying is that I think in the realms

of wildlife I'm not sure that it plays as big a role as perhaps it could or should. I also feel that the Natural History Unit itself has perhaps been a bit reluctant to use radio to engage people in ideas enough, or issues. For example, the environment I think would have been perfect ground for radio and we did do a little bit years ago and they do a little bit now.

But if you look at that territory, that territory's been kind of hijacked by other departments within the BBC. It's done out of Birmingham or it's done out of London, the environmental stuff or costing the earth, about the economics of the planet. I think these are all bits of territory that the NHU has let go which I think is a bit of a shame actually. In fact, even in television I think they've let them go a little bit and this could have been rich territory for the NHU to move into. I think perhaps it's lost them because it is so much more a muddy, wellie boot nature trail sort of place rather than an ideas, let's challenge people and make them think a bit sort of place. The NHU that is.

RH: Might that slight constraint have been part of the reason why you chose to move across to TV or were you headhunted? How did you make that move?

BL: Well, there has always been, as you well know, a natural evolution of all the people in radio. Jeffery Boswall had started in radio. I think John Sparks had. I think Richard Brock had even. I think there's always been a tradition that you graduated to television and in fact there's a lot of reluctance to this now and there was then too because we felt, and I still feel, that radio is a very sophisticated, in some ways much more sophisticated medium than television anyway. So this idea that you some how graduate to something less challenging seemed a bit boring actually and rather sort of arrogant.

But that was the perception and I was offered an attachment as a researcher in the Natural History Unit with you and with Mike Beynon working on *Animal Magic* (7) for a few months which came as a complete shock. Then I worked on *Nature* (8) with you, Robin Hellier, between the end of 83 then through for several years. I loved *Nature* (8), as I think we all did, because for me in some ways it was like a return to radio. It was stories, it was beginnings, middles and ends. It was go out and do it and transmit it in three weeks' time which I really loved and that really whet my appetite, although I still felt quite overwhelmed by the medium and understanding lenses. I remember Martin Saunders, the cameraman, said to me once will we need the **baby legs**. I didn't know what baby legs and luckily my PA, Liz Appleby, was somewhere nearby and she nodded. I said, yes, I think we will and Martin assumed I knew what I was talking about when in fact, of course, I didn't.

RH: So Nature (8) became quite a good training ground for you in television. Just reflecting back to that period, what do you think the significance of Nature (8) was in wildlife broadcasting?

BL: Well, I guess we all would love to think that we've done something really significant when in fact in the grand scheme it's not very significant. But with all the modesty I can muster I would say that as a programme, as a thing for the NHU to be doing at that time, I think it was really quite a leap into the dark. It was the first time as far as I know that the NHU really embraced international environmental issues like acid rain or the conversion of rainforests into pastures for making hamburgers in America which, as you know, caused a few problems. It felt very exciting to be doing it.

I remember very clearly as well that within the NHU we were viewed as a very rogue, loose cannon bunch who were doing a whole lot of stuff that was boring, talking heads. Who wants talking heads? They really at that time and this is when, as you well know, 83, 4, 5, the NHU considered itself to be a place where you made films about birds or you went to somewhere, filmed everything that moved and called it *The World About Us* (9) or whatever. It was very pure wildlife. There was no place for people other than presenters for a programme. On *Nature* (8) we were almost a little breakaway group doing something quite alien but we were excited about it and I think that excitement actually slowly started spreading sideways into the rest of the Unit. There was a real buzz about it.

RH: How do you think that's gone subsequently, the environmental and conservation programming, between then, 20 years ago, and now?

BL: Well, I feel a bit torn about this because I think environmental programming in general on the BBC has increased and that's really gratifying because it really needed to. I mean there's so much that we've needed to plug into and understand and it is being done. So that's good and the NHU has done some of it which is good. It's also, I'd say, increased the diversity of its output hugely which is good. At the same time I would say that in my opinion the NHU never really fully grasped this ball of environmental programming and it never really became the leader which I think it could have.

I think from that time on with *Nature* (8) people in news would come to us for perspectives on environmental issues because they knew nothing about ecology, they knew nothing about species, and they knew nothing about the connections between animals. I think we were in a unique position to take a lead in that programming and we could have been in the forefront today.

So although NHU output and wildlife programming in general output has increased and diversified hugely which is good, I still feel that for me it's a lost opportunity that this one area that perhaps is the most critical area for the 21st century in a global scale has been sadly neglected by the wildlife filmmakers. We were very slow to move away from the fluffy bunnies and engage with the issues. We are engaging with them now so that's good. I just think that we let someone else take the ball and run with it a bit too much.

RH: Clearly the BBC, the NHU there is all and should be or could be the major player. Are there any other players out there that have had a significant role?

BL: I think there are. I think news and current affairs have seen it. They were very slow to see it. I remember when the first advertisement in the BBC for an environment correspondent was advertised about 86, 87. In fact, I applied for it thinking I could do that and I think it was Alex Kirby who got it. I remember thinking that would be a very logical step for me to do or for Ian Guest or some of us. Now, of course, the journalists would never have accepted a non-journalist. Ian did but I never had that formal training so that was a complete non-starter.

But I'd say news and current affairs have seen the need for this and gone straight into that empty niche. There's a unit in Birmingham, *Country File* (10) I believe, they went straight for that and I think they've done a very good job. I think the unit was far too wedded to pretty pictures and far too afraid and inexperienced in storytelling. So it was very reluctant to move in there and other parts of the BBC have. I'm talking about this so much as it's just a BBC thing. There are others who have tackled it as well and I do not want to pretend that it's only in the BBC. But the BBC, I'd say, has dominated it nonetheless.

3. Presenting

RH: Bringing it back to yourself. From fairly early on when you started on Nature (8), you had this career that was developing in production but you also got in front of the camera. Can you just describe how that happened and the effect it had on you and your career and how it progressed?

BL: I remember in the run up to recording one of the *Nature* (8) programmes John Sparks said to me, and it felt to me like it was quite out of the blue, why don't you sit hear and read this bit of autocue. I sat there and read a bit of autocue and the next thing he suggested that maybe I should be a reporter on one of the stories, it was one of my own stories. At one level it seemed a very logical, natural thing to do and I quite enjoyed telling some of the stories that I was intimately involved with and that I knew about, and that I felt that I could bring some passion or knowledge to bear with.

I think what happened was that I actually did more presenting and I quite enjoyed it but it also made me in a way that as a producer you never are, it made me very aware of how do I look. Gosh, am I losing my hair, what's this shirt and that having to look at yourself in the mirror and worry about it brought out a self-centredness in me that I didn't like, a sort of self-awareness. It felt to me like it was getting in the way of what I enjoy doing which was telling stories. I never felt I was going to be the next David Attenborough. In the end it felt like a bit of a distraction from the main event for me. I also realised that I was also being asked

to present things about subjects or topics that I knew nothing about and I didn't think I did that very well. I sometimes was frustrated. I'd say, well, why am I asking this? Maybe I was a bit too bullish or pigheaded or something.

I just found myself in a few situations where I thought why am I doing this, why am I here? I'd rather be telling my own story or producing something. So I dropped out of it although, as I say, it's not as if people were clamouring at my door to do more and I was never going to be the next David Attenborough. So it felt a logical step. To summarise I would also say as a presenter you were ultimately a plaything of the producers and you are a flavour of the month. I didn't want to have the fact that I was losing my hair or getting older or the viewers no longer thought I was good looking get in the way of what I enjoyed in my career. So I thought I'd rather stay in charge of this, tell the stories and find someone else to be in front of the camera, someone who could do it better than I could.

RH: Having had that experience as a presenter and obviously as an experienced producer, how do you think presenters are used in natural history films? Do you think they're valuable and valued and well used?

BL: I think they're hugely valuable and I think one of the reasons wildlife has come to dominate the specialist factual areas is because there are many very good presenters. None equalling the great Attenborough it has to be said but many very, very good presenters who can bring a quirkiness, a personality. Look at Bill Oddie. I mean I'm sure he's loved because he's so imperfect and that's not a joke. I think that's why he is so loved is that he's a very imperfect man and I think people like that and I think they're fed up. There was a time when the NHU had all these wonderful kind of 2D cut-out presenters who all looked a bit too scrubbed, a little bit too clean. They would never dare have an opinion. They all were there to present programmes and they were a bit sort of children's telly if you know what I mean and I think that was a bit of shame.

I think in principle a presenter can bring so much personality, passion, personal interest to a programme. I think it has helped hugely in spreading an interest in wildlife programming.

RH: Can you think of any misuse of presenters, not necessarily the individuals but the way in which they're portrayed or portray themselves?

BL: I guess I'm not a fan as many others aren't either of the kind of 'grab it, I've always wanted to hold a python' school of presenting. Even Steve Irwin I have to say, although we all I guess end up with a respect for the dead and I think he was a talented and passionate presenter, I didn't enjoy watching his programmes and I didn't like the way he held animals and grabbed them and touched them. At the same time I don't want to be too precious about it. I think it engages a lot of younger viewers especially, I think they love that. It's energetic, it's full of adrenalin and I think a lot of younger viewers, as I say, really go for that. It's a bit like zoos. You may ideally not like them but if they inspire a passion among the young then I think there's a good role for them. But for me I always felt there were too many of that style of presenters and it's a style that I don't like very much myself.

RH: I'm not sure whether it was round about the same time when you were starting to get, not exactly disillusioned with presenting but questioning whether it was what you wanted to do, that you chose to move out into the Indie sector. What was it that actually motivated that?

BL: It's hard to think back to it because I remember leaving the NHU after about 10 years, somewhere around 89, 90, with a slight sense of tail between my legs. A slight sense of failure although it was completely my own choice to go. I think what it was partly was that I was very interested in sync documentary work, people, the connections between people and nature, presenter led or story driven. I still felt the NHU was very sort of fluffy bunny, wildlife, no talking heads, nothing beyond the animals, and I didn't feel very at home. After *Nature (8)* went onto a slightly different footing out of really TV features I think, a different part of the BBC under Peter Salmon, I felt that I'd lost my secure footing in that area. It had in fact gone on to become the domain of the more journalistic and that was a good thing. But I felt a little bit as if my baby, or our baby, had been taken away.

So I was left without a natural home in a way in the Unit. I was quite arrogant I guess. I thought, well, I can do this somewhere else or I can do other things. I had already spent some time when I was at the BBC working on *Global Report (11)* in 1987, and I also directed for *Heart of the Matter (12)*. I guess I was really getting into the wider documentary area. But when I left the Unit it was with a sense that I just didn't feel that I had a natural home and felt I wanted to make harder hitting stories than I could find room for in the NHU.

4. Independent producing

RH: How did the independent world compare with the BBC once you were out there?

BL: That was a really, really strange experience because I thought, okay, it's going to be dog eat dog out there. It's going to be really tough and I was really quite terrified even after just 10 years of being in the Beeb of leaving but I found actually quite the reverse. I think there's probably more vicious criticism and backbiting in the BBC than there is outside. I think outside there's a kind of gentleman's rule. Everyone is out there exposed and so there's a tendency, I think, to treat people with respect because you could be up, you could be down but we're all going to be together out here in a rather icier world than the comfortable BBC. I think people treat each other with a little bit more respect than they do in-house. I'd compare in some ways the BBC to a public school where there's none so cruel as a sixth former who thinks he's the bee's knees and he's surround and protected in a school. It's always been a bit like that in the BBC. So outside I found it actually quite a warm home.

I also found that being in control of my own destiny, although it was a bit frightening because how am I going to pay the mortgage this month, it was also really liberating in the sense that you began to realise that you might do things because of the money. You need to pay the mortgage, you don't like doing it, but this is how you can do it this month. Then there are things that you know you really want to do that you might be prepared to be paid less to do but your passion is there. So you reconnect with why you're doing it in a way that I think a lot of BBC people lose track of completely.

I'm now back at the BBC. I see people doing something and it's just they'll do whatever's handed to them and that's fine, that's being a good team player. But at the same time I think you have to lose track of why you're doing it. You're doing it because you're being paid a salary in the end for a lot of the people in the BBC. Whereas as an Indie you're doing it either because you need the money or because you really want to do it. I think that sense of reconnecting with your own passion and why you're doing it I think is really healthy. You may lose sleep over your lack of money or the precariousness of your life but I think you charge other batteries to do with your creative self and why you're doing something.

It also is a very levelling experience. If you fail, you fail, that's your reputation, and you may not work again. It's not like in the BBC, well, we'll just put him onto something else. Really you're on the edge a lot but it's a very invigorating feeling too.

RH: Did you feel that that different kind of atmosphere enable you, or enables Indies, to produce things differently or better? Are there things that they can do better than can be done from inside a large bureaucracy?

BL: Yes. Maybe I'm a bit biased here because I enjoyed being an Indie but I think the Indies are the ones who take the risk much more than in-house BBC. They're always the ones who do things out on the periphery, partly because they have to. They know the BBC will do Africa, they'll do the Arctic. The BBC holds the centre ground. The Indies are always around the periphery, edge of the stage, trying desperately to make a living out of the stuff that maybe someone else, the big boys, don't want to touch. In that way you're always forced into the new territory.

I look back to a series like, say, *Congo (13)* that I did in the mid to late 90s. I think it proved to be successful and yet it combined anthropology, sync filming, archaeology, pure wildlife. It was a weird mixture or it felt weird at the time, and I know my exec producer in the BBC was really worried about it for a while and I don't

think I could ever have made it in the BBC. It would not have arisen in there. I would have been interfered with I think a lot more. So I think that was a perfect example.

I was forced into that territory because I can't compete with the NHU, I don't have the budgets. I don't have the commissioner's ear to make something called Africa. But if I take a little corner and approach it rather differently as an Indie then I might get this made. My budgets were smaller, our staff were leaner but it took risks and I think in the end that's what the BBC has to do more of. I think it's what the Indies are much better at doing.

RH: I think most people would agree that Indies do certain things very well. But is there anything conversely that if you were making it that you would choose to make from within the BBC that probably only the BBC could actually do?

BL: Yes, for sure. I don't mean to be disparaging of, say, the NHU. The truth is that something like Planet Earth (6), Blue Planet (14), could never have been done as an Indie or should I say would never have been done as an Indie. That sort of scale of budget, the infrastructure, team structure, even BBC infrastructure in terms of being able to get in touch with the BBC office in New York for this or that or the BBC library or footage, existing footage, you couldn't do it anywhere else. The BBC does a lot of those big things better than anyone else and I think you could only really make a series of that scope and ambition from within the BBC.

Having said that, I think the BBC needs to be very careful that it doesn't go on assuming this because in the end, especially at a time when it's firing people and a lot of the talent is coming out, these days if the money were there those things could be done by others and I think in future will be done by others if the BBC isn't very careful.

RH: The BBC and others though seem to be moving on from those big projects into lots of different platforms, and one in particular at the moment which seems to be growing is the move into the feature film market. Have you any thoughts on how that's going and where you think it might go?

BL: Well, I think this is the big excitement for all of us at the moment, isn't it? March of the Penguins (15) just a couple of years ago did, whatever it was, \$18 million of business. I mean amazing to think of the skills. The interesting irony of March of the Penguins (15) is that that was probably a five minute sequence in Blue Planet (14). So somebody had the wit to see that this wasn't just worth a five minute sequence, this had the potential to be a 90 minute film that would attract \$18 million worth of business. That was the real skill, somebody seeing that and going for it.

I think it's another example of how the big BBC always going for the big epic stories might miss the obvious, and the obvious is sometimes this little funny, quirky story over here is actually potentially even bigger than this cosmic series which tackles every thing under the sun. Because everything under the sun is a compendium, isn't it? It's like 'let's go through this encyclopaedia and see every creature that's ever lived'. That has a certain engagement and it can be very impressive but sometimes you just want a little engaging story, a narrative which March of the Penguins (15) was, that I think people want much more at an emotional level.

So I think that's the thing. As the emotional side, and this goes back a bit to Innocent Killers about the wild dogs, as we try to connect more with that I think we're moving the goalposts and features are going straight for the emotional jugular. Can we make people feel about this rather than just think about this and I think it's a very exciting area. I think this is a sort of irony that the most exciting part of documentary is not making people think but making people feel, and that's what the features do.

Now whether it can continue, whether it can be successful I don't know. I do wonder whether some of the people moving into it have those skills. They may be great at creating epic visuals but will they move people? They may be great at giving that sense of wow in a programme but will they ever give people a sense of tragedy or comedy? Will they move people in an emotional way? These are big questions. I think

some of the teething problems that we're all having in that area are to do with the fact that once again the NHU's very good at animals and epic visuals but not necessarily very good at making people think in a questioning way, or making people feel in an emotional way.

So I think it's an interesting area and I wouldn't be at all surprised if people from completely out of left field come in and dominate this area because they're storytellers. They're emotionally engaging fiction writers and filmmakers rather than documentary makers.

5. In the field

RH: Bringing it back to yourself again for a while. Thinking of all the experience you've had over the years, have you been to places where you've found yourself as a filmmaker in a local population in a place where you were unexpected? Have you had any interesting experiences or difficulties as a result of being in those remote places?

BL: I have. I guess the most dangerous place I ever went to without even realising how dangerous it was at the time was I crossed the Darien from Panama into Columbia twice at the end of the 80s. I remember feeling quite threatened because this is a journey that is by canoe. It's with Indian communities. It's walking through jungles. It's meeting a lot of men in combat fatigues with rifles and machine guns. I very naively thought, well, I can do this on my own and I did it on my own. I met up with one or two others but that was a very foolish thing to do with hindsight. I know other people who did that at the same time in that place and were killed or died in one way or the other. I look back and think that was one of the nine lives, if you like, where that could have ended quite nastily.

RH: You went on two trips. You went on the first trip and then you went back and made the film.

BL: Yes, I went back to make a film about it with an American writer called Jonathan Massler. It's interesting the difference between the two because the Darien hadn't changed in the intervening year between making the journey on my own and making it as a film. But the difference between doing it on your own where a soldier takes you out of a bar at midnight at the end of the Pan-American highway and says what the fuck are you doing here, with a gun in his belt. The difference between that situation and being there with six people, staying in a hotel and that bubble of filmness, is chalk and cheese. It was actually quite an easy journey on the film but doing it on my own felt like a rather foolish venture altogether.

RH: Do you think there's an inevitability about exposing yourself to personal risk as a consequence of wildlife filmmaking?

BL: I wouldn't say necessarily just wildlife filmmaking. I think if you're involved in any sort of filmmaking that is about nature, wilderness, the great outdoors, I think you probably are driven by a desire to see places that no one has ever been to, or go to places that you've heard about but you think wouldn't that be interesting. I think what drives a lot of us is a sense of adventure. You want to go to these places, you want to take the risks to some extent. You also want to come back alive and be able to tell the story and make the film but I don't think it's just about wildlife filmmaking.

I think probably a lot of news reporters and war reporters are driven by the same thing. It's like an adrenalin high. You're going to go somewhere where no one else has ever been. You're going to see things that no one has seen and I think that drives a lot of us. It could be that it's a desire to see lions in the Kalahari or it could be a desire to visit some remote Indian tribe as an anthropologist. Who knows? Maybe it drives war reporters to go into Vietnam or did. But I think there's a lot in common there, I don't think it's just to do with wildlife filmmaking.

RH: I think that's to do with the personalities of the people, the kind of people that do it. But if you're going for a news story then it's an event that you have to get to and you're bound to encounter danger and you have to cope with that danger. Whereas on a wildlife film you're going to portray whatever is in the natural world and in those circumstances you have the responsibility for yourself and the crew as well. How

do you feel about dealing with that responsibility?

BL: I guess the *Congo (13)* series jumps to mind there where I remember there was one sequence where we had to cross a swampy river in the middle of the Congo. We knew that in this river were crocodiles and hippos, and all we had were these rather rickety dugout canoes full of holes. The Pygmies were taking us across this 20 minute swampy area. We all sat down on this edge of this dock which was falling apart and rotting and we just laughed because the health and safety people. We could never have done it if we'd signed and lived true to the letter of a health and safety form. I didn't have life jackets. We couldn't possibly have brought life jackets for, what, eight Pygmies and six film crew. It just was a joke.

We'd travelled by light aircraft. We'd gone through jungles and on four wheel drives. You couldn't possibly have done that with all the health and safety. On the one hand we laughed at the ludicrousness of the moment. On the other hand I guess if I was a proper grown-up I'd say I took risks I shouldn't have. But I think this is what's happening, that it's all becoming bolted down and manicured and managed. In a way I regret the passing of those Wild West days where you just did it because I think a lot of the sense of adventure and spontaneity is going out of it. At the same time I am a grown-up, I've now got two children and I wouldn't let them do that, that's for sure.

So I feel torn about it and it's important that we do look after people. The thought that, let's say, I might be responsible for the death of a cameraman because of a dugout canoe going down in a swamp in the Congo is horrifying, and I often thought about that. In fact, in one situation I had an assistant producer who came down with very serious malaria and I knew we had the insurance to fly her out. But I knew that to get her to the airstrip we had to take her on about an 8-10 hour journey down a river in sunshine. I was told by the local scientist, if you take her on that canoe tomorrow you'll kill her. On the satellite phone I had Dr Coulson from Whiteladies Health Centre saying, if you don't fly her out tomorrow she'll die.

So it was a very difficult decision and in the end I trusted the local scientist who'd lived and worked there for years. Even though probably that was the wrong thing to do now, looking back 10 years, I probably would have been forced to fly out because of the way the whole health and safety thing works. To cover my arse I probably should have flown her out but I felt at the time, and I still feel, I did the right thing. She survived it, she was fine, but she was running horribly erratic temperatures way above safe levels, 104, 105. In a funny way I think we probably saved her life by keeping her there.

So the responsibility's always there but at the same time I think we're all drawn to risk and I think there's a real contradiction in there.

RH: That was clearly a difficulty decision to make. Do you think we, you, wildlife filmmakers are adequately equipped and trained to cope with the kind of conditions that you work under?

BL: No, we're not but I think it would be very boring if we were frankly, and this probably just shows my age. I think part of the reason I've done what I've done, I think part of the reason a lot of us do what we do, is we want to take risks. We want to go to the edge of something and peer over the side and say, oh, wouldn't that be a nasty fall. If you're going to put safety fences in everywhere and training courses and forms to fill out, I think you're killing something that is inherent in the whole business. I think there's a danger that the formalising, the bureaucracy, the whole thing, is just killing a lot of the creativity that is there that's part and parcel of it. It may be an ugly side of it but it's connected and I don't think you can separate them out.

RH: But is there a difference between being able to go the edge and peer over or not being allowed to go to the edge or going to the edge and peering over and falling in and having a better chance of being able to get yourself out again?

BL: Okay, I'll think about that. I guess if what you're saying is can we be better prepared to tackle the risks when we find them? Yes, we can and probably should be. I think what I'm saying is that at a more gut personal level that there are people who even given that they'll then go to the bottom of the gorge and they'll

put themselves through another risk because that that's the sort of person, the sort of people, they are. They don't want to go to a place where someone's written out the health and safety form and worked out all the risks. They want to go to a place where the risks themselves are unknowns.

So how do you prepare for that? You don't and in fact that's the whole thing, you want to go to places where the risks are unknown sometimes and I think that's quite an important part of it. On *Congo (13)* again, I found myself in Brazzaville in the middle of a civil war and I could hear gunfire. I didn't know really what was going on and I had one or two very unpleasant encounters with soldiers who wanted money or they wanted things that I had. I remember thinking I could be in that ditch in a moment if I'm not careful. I don't want to over-dramatise it because I didn't end up in the ditch but all I can say is you come out of that situation feeling alive. You don't often come out of the NHU onto Whiteladies Road feeling alive in quite the same way.

So I think that drives a lot of us to do what we do in a funny little way. Even though you don't get that sense of danger very often I think it's quite an important part of what we do and why we do it.

RH: Can you think of any other examples of sequences or films that you're proud of that have come out of those situations of extreme risk undertaken?

BL: Not really and I guess the irony of it all is that you might be taking risks that are somehow satisfying you in some way or pushing some button in your psyche but it doesn't mean it's going to make a good film. In fact, a lot of films made in those circumstances are dreadfully self-indulgent and blow up the dangers and make you seem like some hero which you're really not.

So, no, I don't think I would make any connection between films I'm proud of and situations I've been in. I'm just saying that I think sometimes they are tied together because especially wildlife filmmakers or anthropological filmmakers probably want to put themselves through some of those situations.

6. Reflecting

RH: Looking back over all the things that you've done until now, and knowing there's more coming in the future, what so far has given you the most reward or pride in what you've produced?

*BL: I guess I would pick out a couple of programmes. I'm very proud of *Congo (13)* because I felt that bringing these different elements of history, geography, anthropology together quite informally I think worked. I think it showed the way in some ways as to how wildlife filmmaking could begin to embrace other disciplines and cross genres a little bit. So I'm proud of that.*

I'm also proud of another film I made called *The Cultured Ape (16)* which was made in about 12 weeks flat for the launch of BBC4 about personality and culture in animals. I found that just a fascinating journey really through some interviews with some fascinating people, looking at how our understanding of, say, apes has changed from them being little black boxes without any attributes that we could identify with into a current understanding where we now realise that just about everything we think of in our world, in our own human world, as being special. Whether it's intelligence or tool use or emotion, personality, all of those things, even culture, can be directly linked back to our relatives in the primate world and even lower down.

I found that fascinating and in fact it did pick up Best of Festival at one of the festivals after I made it. I was very, very pleased with that because it's an unusual wildlife film. It's quite a cerebral exercise in interviewing and finding library footage, and in that sense a little bit unexciting but I thought intellectually it was a really exciting film to have made and I enjoyed making it very much. It was maybe a bit like a radio programme to be honest so pushing those buttons.

RH: I was just thinking that in a way it's brought your two different disciplines together because it could have been a radio programme. Clearly it was a successful TV programme but not many TV producers could have made it.

BL: You're being very kind. The truth is that an awful lot of broadcasters would not have wanted it either. It was quite an intellectual exercise but I'm very proud of it. To then pick up a nice award, in fact it picked up several. I was very pleased that it seemed to straddle the divide.

One other film I'd pick out is *Life on Air (17)*. I was invited, I think by you, to make the film about David's 50 years in broadcasting in 2002 I believe. The opportunity to work with David Attenborough and to make a film. In fact, we got Michael Palin to interview him and to present the programme. It was a wonderful opportunity to meet two wonderful people, both giants in television. That was a real treat and it was an indulgent film to make, to have all of David Attenborough's library to dip into and Michael Palin to do an interview was a bit like look, no hands. It was just a wonderful opportunity. I enjoyed that hugely and the opportunity to do that again would be wonderful.

RH: At the other end of the spectrum? Anything that you've been disappointed by? Anything that you didn't quite pull off?

BL: All sorts of things I never quite pulled off. I guess the time in my professional life where I felt least satisfied has been the three years that I was the Head of Granada Wildlife, the old partridge and Survival here on Whiteladies Road. Under ITV and Granada I tried my hardest to get wildlife films of some sort of substance and interest made. It was a difficult task because ITV and Granada had no money of their own for this. There were no slots on ITV. The BBC is great. You go to a festival with half a million pounds in your pocket and you say would you like to come in and make this with us? Running Granada Wild was like going around the world saying we've got nothing in our pockets but would you like to pay a little bit of this and we'll someone else to pay another bit of it. It was very hard work. Very good experience, right at the very commercial edge of wildlife filmmaking.

But to be honest I found a lot of the films and programmes that we made, like *Built for the Kill*. There were a lot of programmes made with my name on the end of them that I wouldn't say I am proud of but I'm not snooty about it. I think all of them had good science in them and I hope they were also commercially successful. It certainly made me realise to the extent to which most people, say, in the BBC live in a complete sort of duvet of protection from the commercial gales that blow out there generally. So it was good experience in that way.

RH: That seems to throw up the imbalance between the BBC and the rest of the wildlife producers and broadcasters. What do you think about that balance? Clearly there is an advantage to the BBC, there's a disadvantage elsewhere. Overall how do you think it plays for the audience?

BL: For the audience in terms of what they see? I think the audience is incredibly lucky to get the fare that it gets from the BBC. The truth is, having worked in and out and enjoyed probably being an Indie more than in the BBC, I still think that in the end it is the *Planet Earths (6)* and even some of the things made by Indies for the BBC with that freedom and sometimes access to that cash, that I think the audience are benefiting from hugely.

Outside the NHU I can't think of any other production company in the world that would make a series like *Planet Earth (6)*, and I think that's incredibly lucky for both the filmmakers and for the audiences. It's really gratifying to see that the audiences, commercial and people sitting at home watching, appreciate something like *Planet Earth (6)*. I don't think it's a coincidence that this programme which people loved watching has also made a fortune for the BBC. I think connecting quality with money making has come at a very important moment for the BBC where worldwide, for example, can actually say we want more of this high quality programme making because it's making money too.

I think the biggest disaster could have been that it was a success in some way on television but commercially not. I think that could have been a death knell for it. But in fact I think if anything it's breathed new life into big, ambitious, landmark series with £1 million, even £2 million per hour budgets and it's the lower end stuff that's suffered. This is sounds very patronising, an old BBC, but I'd say the audience is incredibly lucky to have that sort of stuff on air at the moment. You won't find it anywhere else that's for sure.

RH: So the lack of serious competition hasn't damaged the audience or what the audience receives and sees?

BL: I'd say that's right, oddly perhaps, but I think in this way the NHU has been up until now incredibly protected. Maybe partly because one or two characters like Alistair Fothergill, like Keith Scholey, have carried that love and respect for the Unit upwards and outwards into the BBC. Keith I think has protected the NHU as a senior manager in London. I feel torn about that because as an Indie, in effect it's put a lot of the small Indies including ourselves out of business in a rather unfair way. There's no doubt that the NHU with its protectiveness within the BBC has in effect exterminated most of the small wildlife Indies in Bristol generally. I'd say half a dozen companies I could name who went to the wall, went bankrupt with very talented producers because of the way the BBC mishandled, in my opinion, the Indie world.

At the same time they have created. The NHU has created wonderful things under that shell of protection. It's nurtured, it's brought money in, it's being enabled to make wonderful programmes and who could criticise that. So it's a sort of an irony that I guess I've seen now from both sides.

RH: That's quite a serious point. Now bringing us back to a lighter moment. Again from your wealth of experience, any funny stories, incidents at any stage of your career that you'd like to share?

BL: I would say that I've often thought that was not necessarily funny but ironic is that this is 2008. I know senior managers in the BBC sit around, have coffee, saying what are we going to do when David retires, how are we going to replace him? In 1978, 30 years ago in October or November, I sat in my very first NHU meeting and Chris Parsons announced that he'd just finished *Life on Earth (19)* which went out then beginning of 79. He said the big challenge now is what are we going to do to replace David Attenborough because David even then was in his late 50s. People just assumed he had done his series because how many people do more than one landmark series, very few.

This is one of the great achievements of Attenborough that he not only did *Life on Earth (19)*, he went on to do another one and then another one and then another one. He's done about a dozen. It's a remarkable achievement. I don't think there's anyone else in any field or genre of television that has done that. The closest, Bronowski, Clarke, Winston, they've done series and they've been great successes but they're one-offs. For David to have done this a dozen times is just astounding really.

RH: So if you were Head of the Natural History Unit, what would be your strategy for what happens when David does stop producing films?

BL: It's a very, very good question and I won't pretend that I've studied hard the answer because it's not an outcome I'm expecting. I think the NHU needs to nurture writing skills among its producers much more than it has. It has done something but I think it's like having a flower growing up in the shade, in the shadow of a big tree. It doesn't do as well because the tree is taking all the sunlight. Well, I think what the NHU people haven't realised fully is that David's great skill of writing and structuring stories has protected them from having to do that for themselves. That's what they need to learn how to do is to communicate, to write at the simplest level, whether it's a billing one-liner. If you can't describe to your granny what you're doing in one line, do you know yourself, and yet this is quite an alien concept.

Still in the NHU you find producers who say I don't really do the writing thing and I think to myself if you don't do the writing thing you're not really a producer because that's what being a producer is. It's being able to write one sentence that will make people want to watch your programme, or it's writing a paragraph or it's writing a script of 20 pages, that is the underlying skill. Until you can do that for yourself without David doing it for you, and let's face it he's written every script for every programme, every series he's ever made. It's only when you start doing it for yourself that you begin to grow into those shoes of learning how to be a really good storyteller or writer or presenter.

7. Memorable collaborations

RH: You've mentioned a couple of people that you enjoyed working with, David and Michael Palin. Anyone else that you've come across that has given you real kind of pleasure or enjoyment or has stimulated you in any particular way?

BL: Yes, lots and lot. I've worked with cameramen - Mike Fox, wonderful, wonderful cameraman who made me see so many ways of understanding filmmaking just from the point of view of how you film it and intimacy and energy, and taking the camera off the tripod. When I first started getting into documentary work as opposed to wildlife work I didn't really know what I was doing at all. But Mike Fox in terms of filmmaking made me realise the importance of being intimate, getting people relaxed, taking the camera off the tripod, being confident, winning them over.

The more I've gone into filmmaking the more it seems to me that it's just about intuition and people and their personalities and at every level, whether it's film camerawork or editing. Everyone betrays who they really are in the way they do their job.

I've loved working with so many different editors - Pip Heywood, Dave Thrasher. Editing is the dark art, the lost art of the whole business I think and I know you were an editor. I think in some ways the most least understood, the way in which putting the images together in one order rather than another and the use of music, and the way you play the two together or separate them I think is hugely powerful. Still I think we haven't really explored all the ways that you can put these things together and move people and tell stories. So many editors, cameramen, I've had a lot of respect for many of them.

RH: In some ways there are similarities between the cameramen and the editors and natural history filmmaking is a very specific genre, and the cameraman like Mike Fox who I would also consider to be a great cameraman. But a great documentary cameraman, not necessarily a great gatherer of wildlife behaviour. Do you think it's possible that any one person can actually get both those skills or do you think we will always be working with individuals who are either great documentary or wildlife men?

BL: An interesting question. There are some. Gavin Thurston's another great cameraman who can do both but I think at the end of the day it is a difference of personality that comes out. A lot of the best wildlife cameramen in the end they want to be on their own in a remote place getting to know an animal or a place, and I think that's a very different skill. I think a lot of the great documentary cameramen have a thirst knowledge and desire to find out about other people. I think those are quite different personality types almost. Maybe in my personality I veer more towards the documentary cameraman. I've got great respect for the wildlife cameramen and I can think of a few - Newman or Martin Colbeck I've worked with several times - who are absolute masters at capturing the image and knowing what is going on with elephants, say and knowing how to film and where to be at the right moment to capture something. That is a great, great skill.

But it's also a kind of a private skill and it's quite a vicarious experience. You're eavesdropping with your lens. You're spying on a situation where you are a privileged viewer, often from afar. Whereas a good documentary cameraman I think is right in there, informally part of what's going on. It's the difference between somebody who talks to you and begins to invade your space and somebody who is across a room looking at you. I think for me the great documentary cameramen are warmer people in a funny way. It's a different sort of personality.

RH: Do you think maybe the same applies to producers? Thinking back to earlier on you were talking about the importance of storytelling and how some people have got it and some haven't. I can recall the number of training courses we've had with great writers who've come to try and help the classic wildlife filmmakers, producers, not always with great success. Do you think also maybe in the producers there's two different kinds of people and you'll never get true bonding of both types of skills in one individual?

BL: Maybe that's true and I haven't really thought of it like that but I actually think that writing is a learnable skill. I started out in radio and I think I learnt how to write by having to do it all the time. You do it

every day, every week, you just do it over and over and over again. After a while, and I'm not saying I'm a great writer, but it becomes an acquired skill, you learn how to do it like the way you learn how to work a camera and I think it gets embedded. I think the trouble is in the history of wildlife filmmaking very few people have had to do that every day. They're out on their own in a hide if they're a cameraman/director, say, or they're making the film but they're more involved or interested in the behaviour of the animal and they're protected.

Also this is a very BBC thing where in the outside world, on the other side of Whiteladies Road, if you're a producer you're also a director and you're a researcher and you're an assistant producer and you might be somebody's mother or father. You're a kind of Jack of all trades because you will have to be in that world where you can't earn a living just doing one little narrow band of things. Whereas in the BBC you are required often just to do one narrow band of things and so the opportunity to learn other aspects doesn't come so easily. So writing is something that often a producer, you take a producer on *Planet Earth (6)*, probably wouldn't have written anything other than a health and safety form or a rough treatment which might even then have been written by Alistair Fothergill for three years.

Well, if you went on from one mega series to another like that by the end of 10 years you might have written four billings and that's about it. Your script could have been written by Alistair sitting over your shoulder and then amended by David. So I think there's a lot to be said for having to do it yourself repeatedly and therefore learning how to do it

RH: Taking that analogy, looking at Planet Earth (6), might those producers who make Planet Earth (6) programmes only be capable of making films of that quality because they have been able to devote 100% of their time to the very specific skills needed to get those picture together on the screen, supported by the good storytellers?

BL: Yes, absolutely. I don't want to belittle those skills at all, they are great skills. Alistair himself is a great filmmaker. No one has ever equalled that epic visual adventure that his films always entail and I think that is a great skill itself. Yet even there it's a reflection of his personality, isn't it? He's a big, epic guy and he occupies a larger space than physically you might imagine and it comes out in his films. He thinks big. John Downer's another one. He's very inventive, very creative, devising interesting ways of making the visuals exciting but he's quite a private man and I'm not sure if that's a useful analogy.

I'm not belittling any of the skills. I'm just saying that if you're asking what are they going to do without Attenborough they're going to have to find another writer, that's all I'm saying. I think that's a key part of it anyway.

RH: I think we got into that very interesting area by talking about people that you'd worked with. Thinking now about the animals, the species that you've worked with. Any favourites there or anything you've hated working with, loved working with?

BL: I don't see myself really as a wildlife producer. I like wildlife and people and those connections. I love storytelling but I'm not really an expert on any animal. I did do an elephant film in Namibia with Martin Colbeck, *Elephants of the Sand River (20)* and in fact I've made several elephant films with Martin, and he's been an absolute education to work with. I don't think I could imagine a cameraman with a greater understanding of a species than Martin has of elephants. He is at one with elephants and that's been a real honour to see. I love elephants as a result, as you would with anything you get to know and understand.

I've also done a fair amount of filming with primates, apes and chimps and gorillas, and they're just wonderful. A little bit frightening in the sense that, gosh, is that kind of where we came from, is that who we are if you strip away *The Independent* in the morning. But I wouldn't say I've made real connections with animals. I love wilderness, I love being out in places, on the Downs, in the sunrise, or out in Africa when I was 18. I love that but it's not a knowledge that comes with birds. A lot of the NHU people when I joined were birders and they used to terrify the hell out of me. What is this thing with birds? As far as I was concerned they might as well be trainspotters frankly. I didn't see any love of nature there. I just saw a

desire to tick off a list in some of them. I'd say it's the same with me. It's a generalised love of wilderness and being out there rather than a particular love of an animal or any sort of species.

8. The future

RH: Given your time, particularly your time in the Indies, you have actually done quite a lot of things, different kind of roles you've undertaken. But is there anything you're disappointed not to have done or is there any one in wildlife filmmaking you'd like to have been? Anything not quite fulfilled yet?

BL: I don't find myself wishing to be anyone else and that could sound very arrogant. I don't think I've got the best life ever but I'm very happy with it and I'm very contented. But I would love still to make more drama films about the connections between people and nature. I would love to explore more the emotional connections we have with nature. Why do I want to go up to the Downs in an early morning and just see the sun rising? I mean that's a bizarre thing to do that I can't really imagine other animals wanting to do. Why do we want to do that and why do we form such close partnerships with, say, dogs or cats? Do animals understand a lot more than we give them credit for?

I think exploring those connections between us and them and our connections and our love of animals, or their love of us, is really intriguing and I'd love to make more films in that direction. I think I'm just getting a bit fed up at this stage with being a sort of manager, running other series and mopping up and trying to make things and cajoling people, if you like. I feel like I'm trying to force an outcome. You know those glass screens where you put your hands through the gloves and you've got very clumsy handling of something, that's how I feel as an exec producer. I'm trying to create some outcome in there but I'm not directly connected with it. I'm trying to do it through these gloves and I feel I'm interfering in other people's lives by doing that and I'm not sure it brings out the best in me actually.

RH: There are a number of examples of people who have done that, aren't there? Got to a certain level, got involved in execing and managing and gone back to programme making. So I'm sure there's every chance you could do that if that's what you want. But do you think the prospects are of getting commissions and getting the money for the kind of films that you're talking about?

BL: I think it's improving all the time actually. The way I see this, and this could be wrong and feel free to shoot me down. What I think is happening with documentary, and it's a fine old British intellectual exercise, and it's slowly eroding and becoming much more emotional, much more American I think in many ways. The Americans are a more emotional, warm people in many ways, their culture is. Movies came from America, documentaries came from us, and I think what's happening in documentary is that we're kind of eroding the edges between the old factual area and the fiction area and I think that's really exciting. I think there's room for some very interesting films now. Perhaps more interesting areas to explore now than ever before because people are opening up to this and I think they want it.

So I think there are good chances of doing it. I think there could be a lot of failures out there. I know this is the moment where people like Disney Nature are going into animal dramas and in the end I don't think that a lot of animal films have any kind of real emotional connection actually. I'll be interested to see how they all do. But I fear that to try and turn an observational film about meerkats or elephants or chimps into a drama in the sense that it is emotionally engaging and truly reflects what actually happened, which is kind of what these stories pretend, I'm not sure that can work.

So I'll be interested and I'll watch them all but I think actually *March of the Penguins* (15) trod a very fine line very skilfully between anthropomorphism and reality. I think there have been a lot of films since then that have not succeeded and I think they'll be many more too, and I wonder whether this crop of Disney Nature films will succeed at the box office. So it'll be interesting. I think it's an intriguing area, I hope they work, and I'd love to go there myself but perhaps in a slightly different way.

RH: I think you just answered this in broad terms but if you came up on the lottery have you got one film that you could give a billing for that you'd just go off and make, regardless of commissioning? Just

something you'd love to do and you think would work for an audience because clearly you've got to make it for other people as well as for yourself.

BL: Yes, I think so. There are two films that come to mind that I would love to make. One is about the Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen and it's just a straightforward factual film. It could be virtually a retelling of his life. I mean he was a remarkable, amazing character. Heroes don't come like that anymore. This is a man who decided that the Arctic was a sea, took a boat into the ice, zigzagged through that ice over the North Pole, realised he was going to miss it by 100 miles, tried to reach it in a sled, realised he was going to fail. Headed south, missed his boat, over-wintered in Franz Josef Land in the middle of the Arctic. Turned his sled into a raft in the spring and sailed south. He then was rescued in that attempt. He won the Noble Peace Prize in the 1920s for his work helping the Russians after the First World War. He's a bigger hero than Indiana Jones and no one has ever made that film, so that's a film I'd love to make.

Another more personal film. When I lived in Kenya we had a dog called Julie who was an old, ageing Labrador. When we left we had to leave Julie because we couldn't bring her to the UK and we gave her to friends who lived on the other side of Nairobi. To cut a long story short we never heard what happened to Julie. She disappeared from these friends' house and we thought what's happened to her, we didn't know. Weeks and weeks later somebody rang my father and said the house that you were living in, we've got a very sad story. We took some people round who were going to move into the house and they found a dead dog on the front door. We put two and two together, and Julie at the age of 15 had crossed Nairobi, 10 miles, to find our house. I often think what was going through her head? I find it moving now and I'd love to make that film. It's an emotional film but it's also a film about animal behaviour and about what's going on in an animal's head. I'd love to make that. I'd love to make people feel what I have felt about that.

RH: *That's very interesting because both those ideas clearly focus on something very singular, a person, that particular animal and would only be successful as a result of the strength of the storytelling that you bring to it which is a recurring theme of what you've been talking about.*

BL: Is it? I hadn't even picked that out. Okay, well I'll learn from that.

RH: *Does that reflect at all if I asked you about maybe your favourite all time programme or series? I just wonder if that feeling you have about storytelling actually would be reflected in what you might choose?*

BL: My favourite all time wildlife program? I have to be honest with you, an awful lot of them just wash over me because I don't find the stories terribly engaging. I think *Planet Earth (6)* was the only TV series where I, my wife and our younger son all wanted to sit down and watch it for slightly different reasons together. For me *Planet Earth (6)* was a revelation because it doesn't have a strong story which I've always believed to be a key thing. So that was a real lesson for me as well because I thought how can this work but, boy, I think it worked.

So epic visuals, wow, respect and majesty. It's interesting. I think there was an emotional element to that which I think is very powerful. It was full of respect for the earth and I think that came through. So that for me was mega but not very many others have really made a deep impression although there have been some wonderful films. I think that one I found emotionally quite engaging.

RH: *Would anything have stuck in your mind as being a truly dreadful example of wildlife filmmaking? Something for any particular reason you think ought not to have been made or should have been made in a different way?*

BL: There are a lot of films that I don't have a very high regard for but just because I felt they haven't been handled particularly well. There are very few films that I would hate or think shouldn't have been made. I'm trying to think if there are any that I've seen. I think the real danger we all skirt around is mediocrity, kind of like didn't try hard enough, didn't put enough love or passion into it. They're just like loaves of bread sitting on a shelf somewhere, they don't have any personality, they don't have anything that says anything new or different and I think that's one thing I've always tried to do. I don't think it's any great

noble aim. I think I've always felt I don't want to do that again. I've done that, maybe I didn't do it as well as I could of but I just want to do something different next time. I always want to try and do something a little bit different from what's been done before, either by me or by others. I don't see any point in making the same film over and over again. So I sometimes see films that are just like the same film made again.

RH: Do you think that mediocrity might be a consequence of overproduction in the sense of volume, just too much natural history, or a consequence of perhaps some people making programmes who are maybe not very well suited to it or not very well trained for doing it?

BL: I'd say it could be all of the above but I'm not looking down my nose at them. I've made some pretty dreadful programmes and very mediocre programmes and we all do and that's how we learn. I think one of the great things about the BBC is that at every level you get people who are somewhere between competent and really, really good. So if you put a whole bunch of people together between competent and really, really good you'll always end up with a pretty good programme and I think that's quite an achievement actually. One of the big surprises, pleasant surprises, coming back to work in the Unit after being an Indie and working in Granada, is that the staff in the NHU, the talent that's there, is just staggeringly good. Really sort of wow, the choices and the people who can do the jobs. They're not always slotted into the right places but I remember in Granada thinking who can we find to do this? You'd have a good idea but you couldn't find a director who could bring it to life or a producer who could manage it or whatever.

The NHU's got so many great filmmakers but I don't think it's ever anyone's fault. You're at various stages of learning how to do things. I think everyone has the potential to be a really great producer or director or cameraman actually. I'm not a great believer in inherent talent. I think we can all learn to do these things.

RH: You've talked a bit about how you approach filmmaking and what you think helped you to make a good programme. But have you any way of qualifying what you think are the essential ingredients of a good programme, a strong programme?

BL: I guess this is going to sound a bit prosaic and predictable but I would say a strong story, a good structure, a beginning, a middle and an end which sounds very predicable. But I think that so often those very simple principles are missing. I think surprising people is very important. Interestingly I don't think visuals. I think the NHU lives on a sense that visuals are everything. I don't think they are actually. I think you can tell a really good story with sometimes quite mediocre visuals and I think people will be really engaged by it. If you can get great visuals as well so much the better, it'll be wonderful. But I think storytelling for me is more important than just the photography.

Was it Hitchcock who said you need three things to make a great movie: a good script, a good script and a good script, and I think that's about right. I think it's the same for what we do too. It's scripting, storytelling and this is David's great skill. His style of storytelling may be a bit old fashioned now and I think when he goes, when he stops making programmes I think a huge vacuum will open up and it'll be rapidly filled with other things. I think very quickly we'll look back on him as if he was a funny sort of peninsular into our world from a bygone age. But he is a great writer, a great storyteller.

9. Industry changes

RH: I guess storytelling hasn't intrinsically changed over the years but in almost every other respect the way in which wildlife films are made has changed and you've got quite a long track record. Have you any thoughts on those kind of changes and how they've impacted on the approach and the way in which films reach the screen now?

BL: I'm not sure I quite understand what you mean. Maybe you can just rephrase it slightly?

RH: The way in which we make films has changed because the technology has changed, the kind of constraints under which we make programmes has changed, I'm thinking of budgets and so on. What do you think are the major changes that you've seen over your career? Do you think things have got better or

worse?

BL: I think they've got better without a shadow of doubt. Take one example, when I worked on *Life on Air* (17) looking at some of David's 250 hours of television, it became clear that anyone who thinks there was a great golden age of wildlife television hasn't actually looked back recently. Because most of the stuff that even David did himself, say in the 50s, 60s, 70s, a lot of it is quite untransmittable now. It's very slow, the picture quality's pretty low, the editing is slow. Even David's storytelling could be a bit loose limbed. In virtually every level I think things have got better although interestingly I think David's storytelling per se reached an absolute pinnacle in the 70s and 80s and I don't think has continued. Slightly sadly I'd say David's storytelling skills have slightly fallen off as he's got older in the last 10 or 15 years.

But I think the diversity of what we're making has increased and I think that's very good. I think the quality of what we're making has improved hugely, absolutely hugely and I think that's good. I think keeping up with the technological changes is proving increasingly difficult. I feel sorry for the producers now working on some of the programmes that I'm working on with them where they're having to learn new cameras, new editing systems, new ways of managing and pathways of post production which are hugely technical. What you know is that when they come out of that learning process in a year or two it'll change again. The technology is moving so quickly now that to be relaxed with your technology as a film cameraman would have been just 10 years ago is almost impossible now. I can't see it happening again.

That 16mm rein of control and power over the wildlife film industry through the 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, I think we will not see it again. Within another blink of an eye we'll all be recording on **P2, hard disk**, high definition cameras and the technology of editing that and viewing **rushes**. The whole thing is changing so rapidly it's terrifying actually I think.

RH: Do you think that relentless march of technology might see in this industry something happening, as has happened in many other industries, where you get younger people who are more akin, more familiar with that, more able to cope with it, getting opportunities much earlier in their careers? Do you think we're going to see a generation of very young filmmakers coming along?

BL: I hope so. I think one of the really positive things about all the change is that it's democratising the business. 20 years ago who could afford buy an **Aaton** or an **Arri** and buy a can of film, I mean that was £100. Well, it's becoming hugely democratised and younger kids. My son has grown up with computers. I do things on a computer, I've been doing them for years, but George says come on, dad, step aside, I'll do that for you. He's a whole generation. He'll be handling cameras, making films and I think that's wonderful. They will come to it with a new grammar, a new way of approaching it, new ways of telling stories and I look forward to that. Although on any given moment I look on the website and think, oh God, is that what's coming, I hope not.

But I'm sure it will happen and there will be geniuses out there who are 13 now who in 10 years will blow our socks off with new ways of doing things. I'm sure it'll happen and it'll be to do with the fact that the technology is cheaper, you don't have to be rich to do it. You can come into it. You can go up on the Downs. You could make a film in a weekend that people would say that's amazing and it will be done. I'm convinced of that and I think it's very exciting.

RH: You think that'll come through into broadcast television? You think that's almost inevitable that will happen?

BL: Yes, I do.

RH: What do you think the consequence would be for what we see on the screen? How will that change?

BL: Well, I hope it'll make it even more diverse, that there'll be more choice. I hope there'll still be room for the more traditional films that I guess I would always want to make as well but I think it's really exciting. I think kids in 10 years or even 5 years, even now, they're kind of talking to each other and making these

things. There's a geeky kid who lives in the US who does his own take-offs of Hollywood films and he puts them on the Internet. George loves watching them and I know a lot of his friends do. This guy, Brandon Hardesty, is probably 16 years old, he's a huge talent and he lives somewhere in America. He's doing these spoof films, putting them on the Internet. Well, that's film making, that's invention and he's able to do it because of the technology and computers. I think it's very exciting.

So I think they'll be making films at a younger age, creating new grammar. I'm sure by the time my son is my age he'll look back on what I do as being completely antique, like stereoscopic photographs or something.

RH: I'm sure you get approached by young people who want to get into the business and knowing how difficult it is at the moment and it is contracting. What do you say to those potential new entrants? What advise do you give them?

BL: I always say the same thing to them and that is if you really want to do this you will succeed. I guess I think that's about the most helpful thing I can say because the truth, as we all know, there's about a million ways of tripping up and not succeeding. But at the same time we know that of all the people we've seen succeed, the only thing they have in common is that they were determined and they wanted to do it. There's no recipe.

I would take away from that situation any sense that you have to follow a set route. There are so many different ways into it which I think is what makes the media so exciting. You don't have to come at it with any particular skill or knowledge. You can love editing, you can love animals, you can love photography. You can love anything and you can get into it and do it well. You just have to be prepared to take the knocks. One of the things that saddens me is the way kids have their youth taken away by the desire to achieve things academically, when at the end of the day a mark on an exam is irrelevant. The people who are going to make it in our world are people who can get on with people, who can tell stories, who are going to respect others. It's to do with very basic human skills and intuitions, not to with any exam result you would ever get or any particular knowledge really.

RH: I guess we have to see that in the light of what's happening. Just recently there's been a downturn in the BBC Natural History Unit with a reduction in the number of people working there. How do you see that and how do you see that impacting in the future?

BL: I think to some extent is an inevitable reduction of what was quite an overstuffed unit. People in the NHU live in cloud-cuckoo-land by and large. They think they can stay in the NHU until they retire and that's honestly the expectation I have found among a lot of them. That they somehow think that for them to be taken out of this sort of womb and taken out to the other side of Whiteladies Road is like a terrible punishment. When in fact the truth is that it could be a great liberating experience for them although they may not see it that way.

So to some extent I think it was an inevitability. The BBC had just sailed off on its funny little journey of protecting the staff with a particular set of specialised skills well beyond the time when this would be found anywhere outside. So I think it was inevitable to some extent. At the same time I guess we'd all wonder whether something as specialised as wildlife filmmaking would still be around even in 10 years' time. I could imagine if we made a few bum series, a few changes of controller, it could be that wildlife as a whole could suffer a terrible blow and go into a real decline because is there any good history or science programming on at the moment? Very little and is it going to come back like a cycle? It might do but you could also imagine that at one point in the cycle it could more or less die. If those skills begin to go, if the passion among the programme makers is no longer sustained, you could imagine that it would begin to disappear altogether. I hope it doesn't but I think it's a very unsure time, that's for sure.

RH: So if I read you correctly you're not too optimistic about the future of wildlife filmmaking?

BL: I would love to think that it would always be with us because I think our understanding of nature and our need to connect with has never been more important. I guess what I'm saying is that in many areas of

the media, I've got cable here and I can get 100 channels, and as far as I'm concerned I'd say 94 of those channels are not even worth pausing on because I don't see anything of interest to me. Interestingly they're not really of interest to most of us in the family so I don't think I'm alone in that. It just worries me that amidst the great diversity of things we're doing this might be the golden age and it could be that in 5 or 10 years it begins to wither a bit. Maybe the younger generation just won't want that stuff, I don't know.

I wonder whether our love of nature itself is something that could begin to wither which is a very depressing thought but is it something that simply will disappear. I've just spent a couple of years going in and out of China. This is a country with perilously little wildlife and little wilderness but the people don't miss it because they've never seen it. So are we just keeping this thing going from something from our grandparents or great grandparents? Could it disappear? I don't know.

I'm not naturally a pessimist at all but I don't think we should be taking for granted the things that we have there. I'd like to think that the less contact we have with nature the more we would want it through the programmes or through our holidays or through window boxes or gardens. But I'm not sure that we can assume that will be the case.

RH: Do you think there's a case at this time for increased awareness of climate change and environmental degradation? Do you think there's a case for - think back 30 years to the beginning of Nature - for some kind of movement like that where television tries to take a lead? Do you think someone's missing an opportunity there?

BL: Yes, I do. You could answer that in many ways. But one straight way of answering it would be I think perhaps more than ever our lives are very busy, very full up, and when we switch on the telly in the evening I think a lot of us, myself included, you don't want to be challenged. You don't want to be lectured at, that's for sure. You just want to have a gentle waft of something pleasant run over you before you try and get some sleep, maybe on a bad day. I think people look to television as escapism.

It could be that some of this campaigning will get diverted to other media. It could end up more on the computer and maybe television will become, as it seems to have, more and more a thing where people sit back and enjoy something and escape from some of the realities of their lives. I don't think we can criticise anyone for that either. I think we all do it and I think it's a natural thing for television to do.

But as for campaigning, I think there is more role for that especially with websites and the fragmentation, the specialisation of channels. I think it could become quite a big thing but I don't think people really want to be lectured at as we know, and we discovered that on *Nature*.

RH: I was going to stop there but you've just given me one final thought which is, if you don't mind me saying so, as a mature programme maker how do you feel about the diverse platforms now as an outlet for the content that you produce? We traditionally were brought up with wanting to get stuff onto the small screen. We'd love to get something on the big screen but what about all these other opportunities? Have you grown to become to value them equally or not yet?

BL: I fear, being a mature programme maker, that I'm possibly a bit too mature to be adaptable enough to a lot of what's coming up. Actually in that area I'm really very optimistic. I think huge opportunities in the web and other forms, other platforms, mobile phones, and all sorts of platforms, mainly I guess computer based, that I think will open up huge opportunities. I'm a great believer that communication per se is a benign influence, and that the more we have access to and can find out the more we will realise what can be done to solve problems we have. Therefore I think we can make a much better world.

So I actually think in many ways that all the media that are now available are going to be critical to solving the problems that we have created. So I'm very optimistic in that way. I just hope that a lot of nature hangs in there through all those changes. I also hope that the younger generation who are going to do these things have the sensitivity and the interest in nature and wildlife that will enable them to do the right things. I think for our culture that's very positive. I do worry about other cultures. I worry, and this is going to sound like I'm

anti-Chinese, I'm not at all, I've huge respect for their culture. But they haven't had a tradition of exposure to wildlife or the environment and those issues, and I just worry that if they grow up without that awareness maybe they won't have regard for it and maybe they'll let it continue to suffer even though it will be to their own detriment.

That may sound a mixture of optimism and pessimism but maybe that's what I feel we're living through.

RH: Good, thank you very much.

[End of file]

People, films and organisations mentioned

Alastair Fothergill

Alex Kirby

Bill Oddie

Brandon Hardesty

Christopher Parsons

Dave Thrasher

David Attenborough

Fridtjof Nansen

Gavin Thurston

Harry Winston

Hugo Van Lawick

Ian Guest

Jacob Bronowski

Jane Goodall

Jeffery Boswall

John Downer

John Sparks

Jonathan Massler

Keith Scholey

Liz Appleby

Martin Saunders

Michael Palin

Mike Beynon

Mike Fox

Owen Newman

Peter Salmon

Phil Daley



WILDFILMHISTORY

100 YEARS OF WILDLIFE FILMMAKING

Pip Heywood
Richard Brock
Robin Hellier
Steve Irwin
T. E. B Clarke

BBC
Disney Nature
Granada Wildlife
ITV
Natural history unit
Partridge Films
Radio 4
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The Independent

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Anthropomorphic: To attribute human form or feelings to a non-human species or object.

Arri: World wide manufacturer of film cameras and related equipment

Aaton: Manufacturers of film cameras and related equipment, based in Grenoble, France

Baby legs: Nickname for a small tripod that holds the camera

Hard disk: Non volatile memory storage device

Indie (Independent): Refers to independently produced media productions

P2: Panasonic's memory card format

Rushes: Unedited and unprocessed raw footage

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